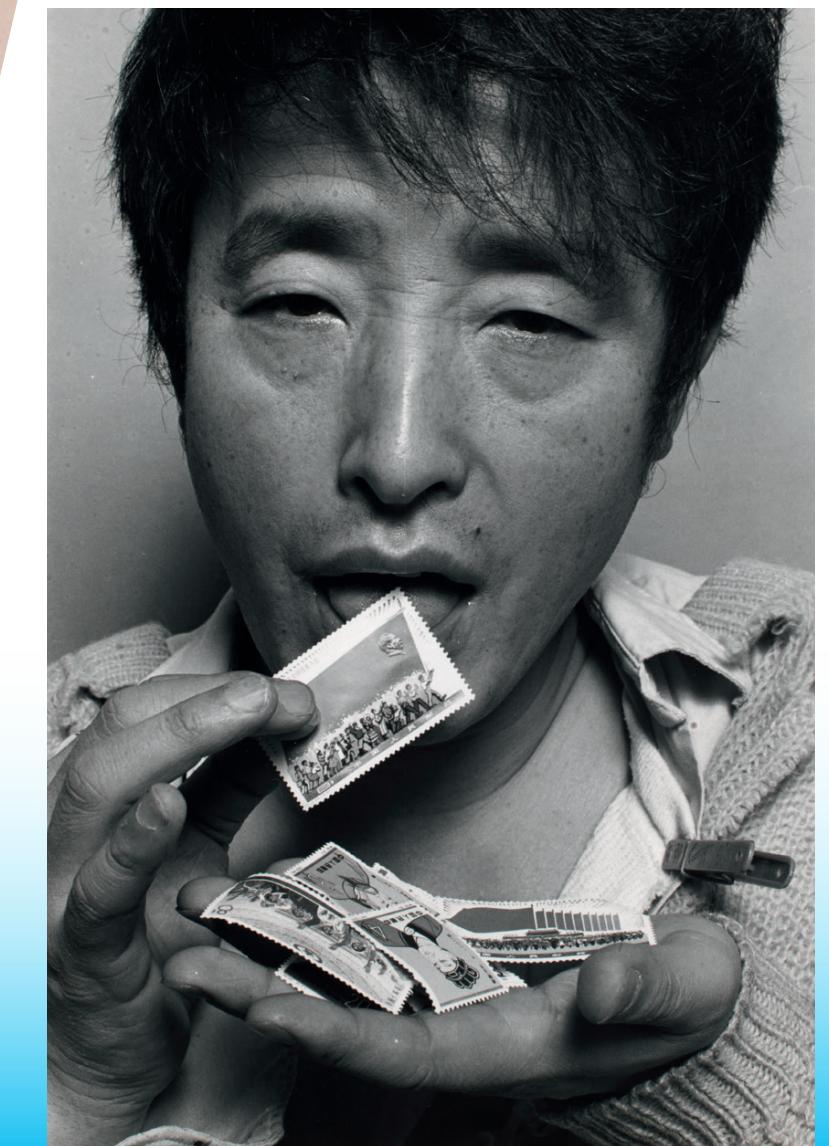
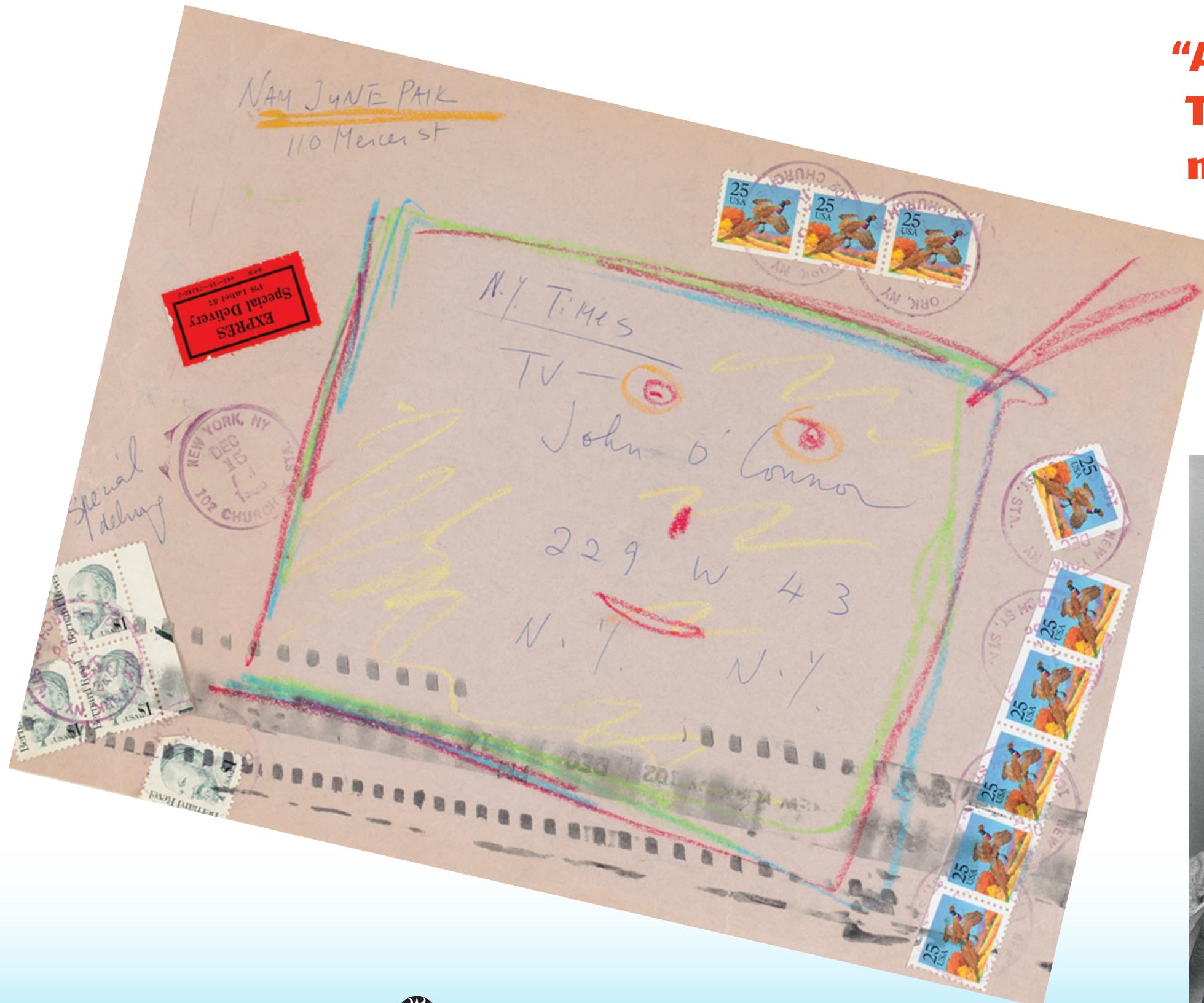


**“As always ... I love your
TV-reportages
more than TV itself.”**

Nam June Paik's Letters to John J. O'Connor



Smithsonian American Art Museum

**"As always... I love your
TV-reportages
more than TV itself."**

The artist, to John J. O'Connor, 1976

About the Nam June Paik Archive

In 2009 the Smithsonian American Art Museum acquired the archive of Korean-born artist Nam June Paik (1932–2006), a gift from the Nam June Paik Estate. Additional items from private collections have also been acquired, including the generous donation from Seymour Barofsky for the estate of John J. O'Connor, highlighted in this publication. Mr. Barofsky's gift includes original artworks, photographs of Paik's performance art, and many of Paik's letters and postcards to *New York Times* television critic John J. O'Connor.

Internationally recognized as the "father of video art," Paik used his innovative, media-based artwork to expand video and television as artistic expressions in contemporary visual culture. With these archival acquisitions, the Museum has become the institution of record for understanding this provocative artist's impact on the art world and for understanding the history of the moving image in twentieth-century art.

The Paik Archive comprises thousands of individual items and materials the artist accumulated in his several studios, including correspondence, writings, sketches, and notebooks, as well as artworks (many incomplete), video and audio recordings, vintage televisions, radios, toys, and other raw materials he used in his art. Unparalleled in both size and variety, the collection offers unprecedented insight into Paik's life, work, and creative process.

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Artists' writings can contain multitudes: drafts of essays, quotes from favorite books, ideas for future projects, musings on form or color, or reminders of more mundane clerical tasks. Such constellations of texts often extend beyond private musings to include correspondence with fellow artists, gallerists, patrons, curators, and friends. How often, however, do we find in an artist's writings evidence of a decades-long creative campaign, one that was never directly acknowledged by its recipient, but instead neatly filed away for posterity?

The above quotation, from 1976, was a typed salutation from media-arts pioneer Nam June Paik (1932–2006). Paik's work is primarily characterized by the exploration of the material properties and aesthetic potential of television. In works such as his single-channel video *Global Groove* (1973), his nation-spanning live satellite experiment *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984), and his monumental installation *Megatron/Matrix* (1995), Paik probed the boundaries of the televisual medium, radically rethinking its aesthetics and its function as both an art form and means of communication. It is therefore not an understatement to say that Paik's affinity for television was unparalleled in the art world. The "TV-reportages" of the foregoing quote—the ones he claimed to love "more than TV itself"—refers to the writings of the letter's recipient: *New York Times* television critic John J. O'Connor (1933–2009). O'Connor had written favorably about Paik's experimental broadcast art at Boston's WGBH in 1971, the first year he was at the *Times*. It was shortly thereafter that Paik began sending O'Connor a steady stream of postcards, letters, exhibition catalogs, and posters, the majority of which were personalized with simple, colorful sketches in oil pastels and crayon. Paik would continue waging his charm offensive by post for the next two decades until 1997, when O'Connor retired from the paper.



John J. O'Connor, about 1997.
Courtesy Seymour Barofsky

Although a sense of professional ethics prevented him from responding to Paik, O'Connor prized these flashes of intermedial ingenuity, which have recently joined the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Nam June Paik Archive. More than ephemera, these papers provide scholars and the public alike a unique look at one artist's efforts to gain the support of the nation's most widely read television critic through a set of modest works that nevertheless reveal Paik's impish sense of humor, unfiltered sincerity, and relentless dedication to bringing his video art to the largest possible audience.

Paik's missives were frequent and concise, and equal parts insistent and adulatory. After reading O'Connor's 1982 review of Paik and Shigeko Kubota's video *Allan 'n' Allen's Complaint*, which examines the lives of artist Allan Kaprow and beat poet Allen Ginsberg and their relationships with their respective fathers, Paik wrote, "Thanks for your support to me and our poor & humble movement, which is winning as you see in the enclosed papers. I will make sure that you will be enshrined in the video-pantheon like Voltaire or Apollinaire." Another note, from eight years later, is stapled to a *Newsweek* article about Paik and features a childlike drawing of a multicolored horse and rider; the words "Happy Horse Year"—a reference to the Chinese New Year—are accompanied by a gentle exhortation to "please see the Whitney show (ends on Feb 18)."

O'Connor, plainly charmed by Paik's communiqués, thus became the first major television critic to regularly write about video art—even when it was being shown on public television at one in the morning. (That was when *Allan 'n' Allen's Complaint* first aired on Channel 13 in New York. Of the late-night program, O'Connor subsequently wrote that it "clearly demonstrat[ed]" Paik's theory that "TV's vibrating field has shaken our arts to pieces.")

Indeed, O'Connor brought an essential degree of self-awareness to his charge as the *Times*' television critic, questioning his own role in critiquing a wildly popular medium that was, above all other concerns, directed by commerce. So amid a steady viewing diet of *Dallas* and *Masterpiece Theater*, O'Connor routinely paused to let viewers know about programming that rested on the margins of television's electronic page. He championed the potential of cable access shows, valorized the journalism of Bill Moyers and David Frost, and covered public television's more experimental side with vigor.

O'Connor's sensibility as a television critic was shaped by his love of theater and art. As the arts editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, where he worked before joining the *Times*, he had written about such diverse topics as experimental dance, underground FM radio, "be-ins," and Warhol associate Paul Morrissey's junkie-hustler film *Trash* (1970). He balanced a wry

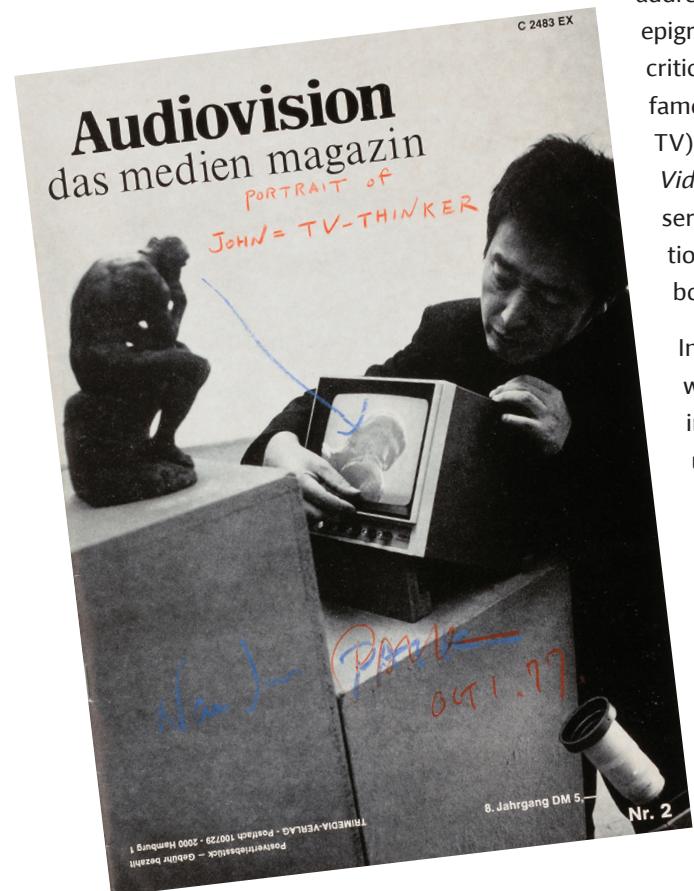
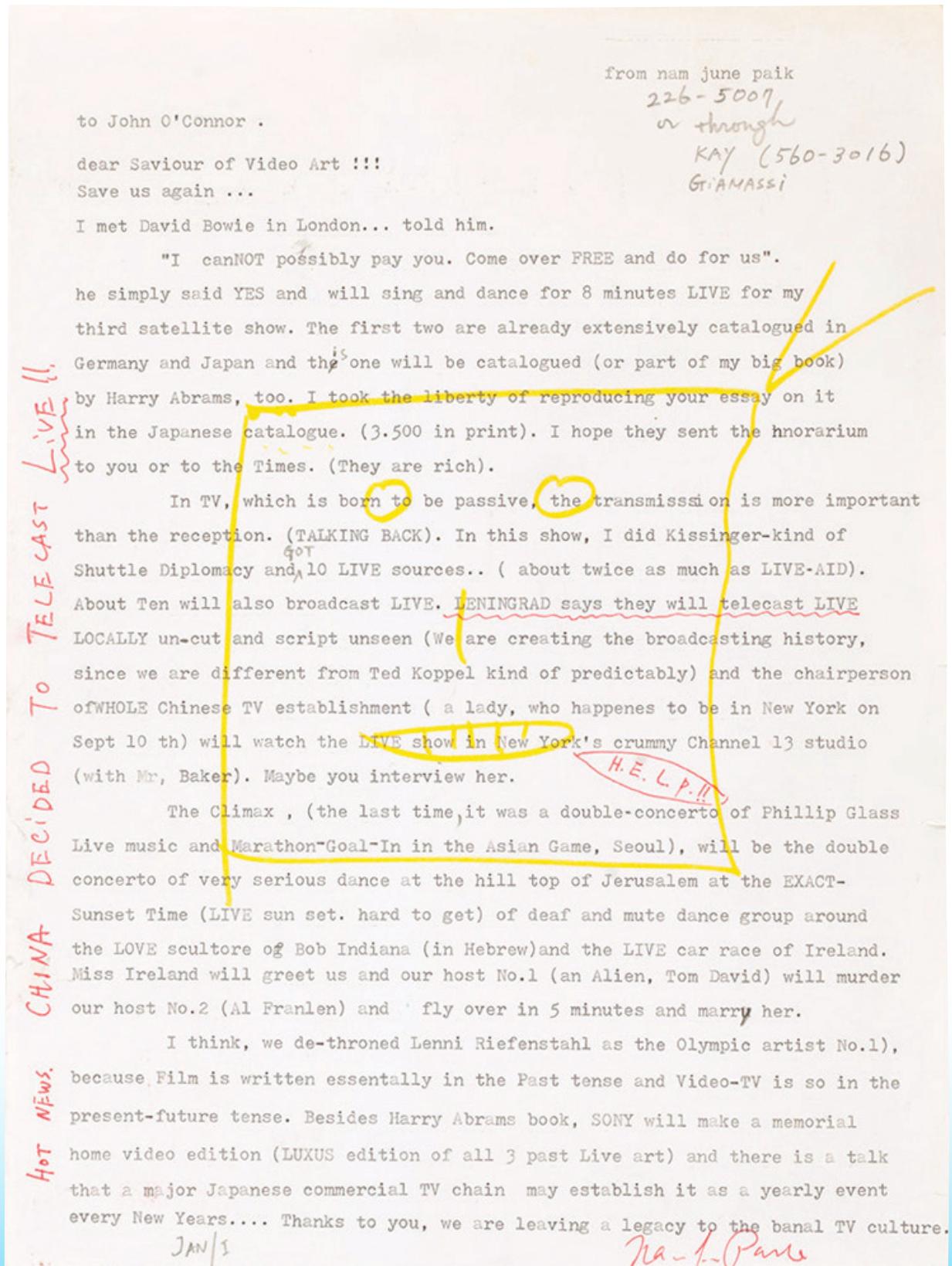
sensibility with the occasional poetic flourish, and a willingness to be surprised by what he saw with an ability to overlook rough edges for signs of an original idea. For instance, he criticized Robert Rauschenberg's muddled 1966 tennis match cum media performance piece, *Open Score*, as a production "bordering on the amateur," yet was able to recognize that such multimedia happenings were of the present and future art moments, and were thus "likely to be around for quite a while."

While O'Connor was no doubt won over by Paik's work, he also realized that Paik's entreaties were shaded by hyperbole. He didn't need Paik to tell him where the artist's true passion lay. As O'Connor wrote in one of the many articles he published on Paik, "Somewhere along the line, he seems to have been seduced by a television set, and he has been reshaping it ever since." O'Connor recognized, for himself, the transformative potential of Paik's visionary practice.

Paik, meanwhile, would keep O'Connor abreast of his myriad projects, regardless of where he was in the world. He sent updates from

Happy Horse Year ("Please see the Whitney show..."), about 1989, color photocopies with additions in ink and pencil, 11 x 17 in.





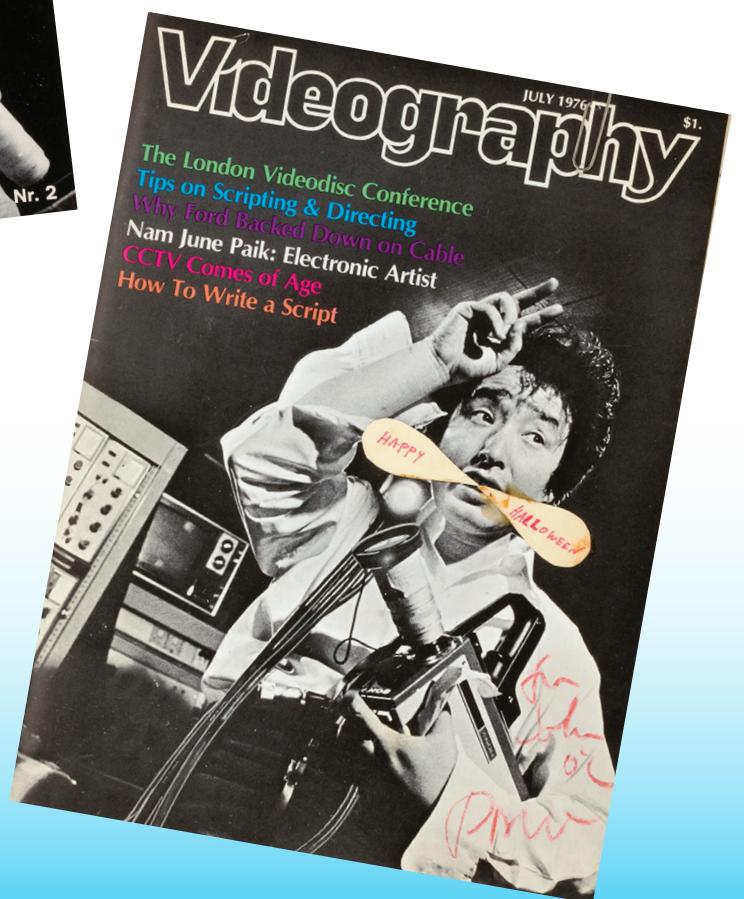
opposite
Letter ("dear Saviour of Video Art!!!"),
n.d., original typescript letter with
additions in ink and pencil, 11 x 8 7/8 in.

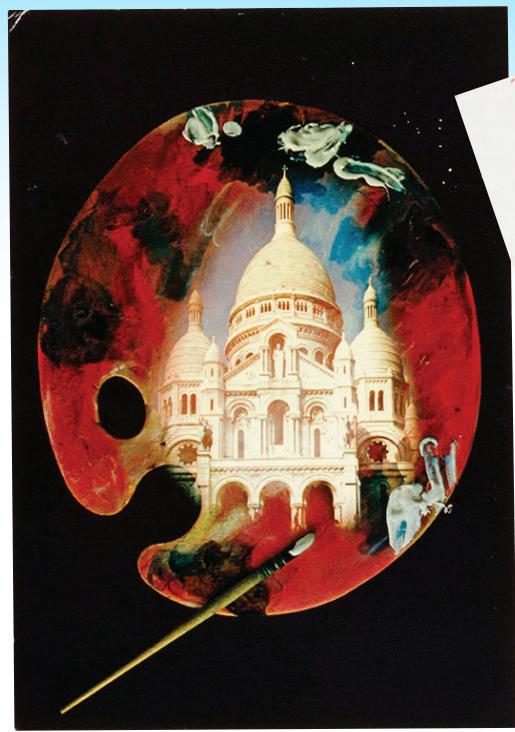
above
**German magazine Audiovision with
inscription ("John = TV-Thinker")**,
about 1977, printed paper, staple-bound,
with additions in crayon and colored
pencil, 11 3/4 x 8 1/4 in.

right
**Videography magazine with collage
and inscription ("Happy Halloween")**,
1976, printed paper, staple-bound with
collage and additions in ink and crayon,
11 1/4 x 8 1/4 in.

Copenhagen, Zurich, Guadalcana, Oslo, and Paris, among other locales, drawing smiling television faces over typewritten letters, and punching holes in postcards showing female pearl divers from Chiba Prefecture or acrobats in Casablanca to mark where he "was"—a favorite visual motif that he did not restrict to his correspondence with O'Connor. Paik addressed his packages to "John O'Connor, TV Thinker"—an epigrammatic twist that served to ingratiate himself with the critic while referring to his own winking take on Rodin's famous sculpture (Paik's *"Thinker,"* naturally, watches a small TV). He drew energy waves radiating from a picture of his *Video Buddha* (1989) in a museum publication, penciled a series of question marks and hearts as mathematical equations as a New Year's greeting in 1979, and festooned books on his art with drawings of mountains and birds.

Indeed, the collage aesthetics of Paik's videos found their way into these mailings, providing O'Connor with insight into how the artist's cut-and-paste sensibilities could be understood as a worldview enlightening every facet of life in the early electronic age. In 1976, Paik pasted word balloons reading "Happy Halloween" emanating from a picture of himself on the cover of *Videography*





above

Postcard (Paris, Sacré-Coeur and palette; "I'm cooking up a big surprise..."), 1983, commercially produced postcard with additions in ink, 5 7/8 x 4 1/8 in.

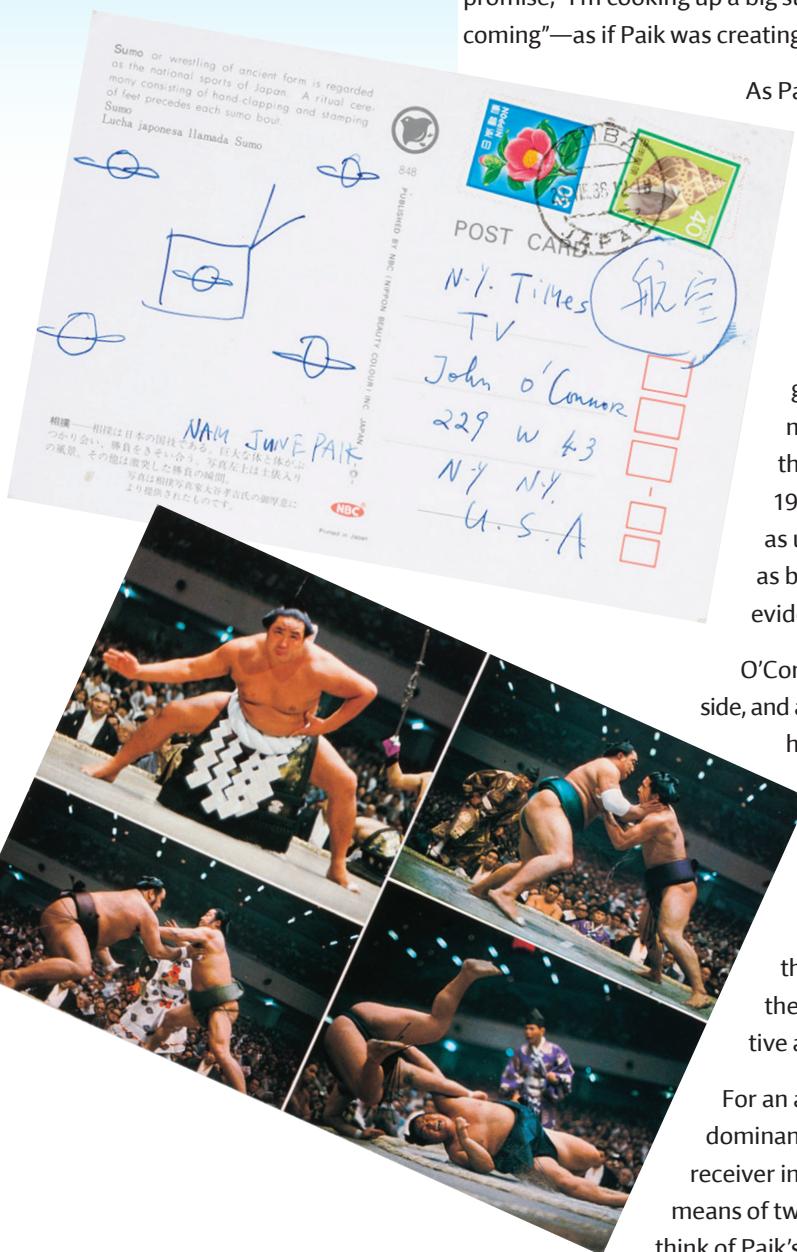
opposite

Postcard (sumo wrestlers, 4 views; TV planet sketch on verso), n.d., commercially produced postcard with additions in ink, 4 x 5 3/4 in.



magazine. His use of the mail as an art form harkens back to his associations with the international avant-garde group Fluxus as well as with the New York Correspondence School—most notably, Ray Johnson, who began mailing found and collaged images and objects in the 1950s and throughout the 1960s. Paik's short missives and smiling television adornments also anticipate today's electronic messaging through texting, Twitter, and chat, in the way they make use of basic icons—almost proto-emoticons—to transmit meaning.

By the time he'd established his gnomic mailings as routine, Paik had become wholly subsumed by the project of humanizing technology, of using television as a media form that could bridge communication gaps not only between individuals, but between nations as well. His utopian streak revived early-twentieth-century dreams of using moving-image technology as a universal language. Paik particularly pleaded with O'Connor to assist in spreading awareness of his trio of live-satellite pieces, *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*; *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986); and *Wrap Around the World* (1988). This last piece featured the participation of ten nations and attracted some 50 million viewers, and juxtaposed performances by David Bowie in New York with a German punk band in Bonn, and Merce Cunningham's dancing in New York to music played by Ryuichi Sakamoto in Tokyo. These pieces mixed high with low, slapstick with seriousness, and ancient Korean drumming with race cars from Ireland. By writing to O'Connor, Paik was advocating for an art form that could reach a mass audience, and, he hoped, that could help bring about world peace. Paik reasoned that if video art was being covered by the paper of



record, it might successfully migrate from the rarefied air of the gallery out into a wider, but still informed, audience.

And so a postcard with a picture of Sacré-Coeur Basilica superimposed on a painter's palette would arrive at O'Connor's apartment, the back of which teased Paik's forthcoming *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* with the promise, "I'm cooking up a big surprise for you from Paris. Wait!! 1984 is coming"—as if Paik was creating the piece just for the critic.

As Paik's approach to media shifted further toward the goals of collectivity and inclusion, the artist, who was once dubbed a "cultural terrorist" for his unpredictable and iconoclastic musical performances of the early 1960s, had become, in O'Connor's estimation, "perhaps the least threatening of avant-garde artists." And even when he couldn't muster full support for Paik's projects—the slapdash and slapstick qualities of 1988's *Wrap Around the World* struck him as unsubtle—he still characterized the artist as being the media figure "whose bread I eat, evidently, whose song I sing."

O'Connor also appreciated Paik's prankster side, and ardently believed that he employed humor in order to mask the political or even emotional valences his work carried. "Mr. Paik is silly like a fox," he wrote in 1988. Describing *Allan 'n Allen's Complaint*, he marred an acknowledgment of Paik's radical aesthetics with its emotional core: "Beneath the playful surface, he can be slyly provocative and, without warning, very moving."

For an artist so committed to disrupting the dominant televisual binary of broadcast and receiver in order to re-establish the medium as a means of two-way communication, it is interesting to think of Paik's dogged pursuit of this one-way relationship. The critic's professional responsibilities kept him from engaging in a full-on correspondence with the artist, but those close to O'Connor recall his delight in receiving Paik's missives, as well as his belief in Paik's historical importance.

ARTnews magazine with inscription
("For John O'Connor"), 1982, printed
paper, softbound, with additions in
crayon, 11 x 8 1/2 in. © ARTnews, LLC.



The admiration, as the saying goes, was mutual. Paik's critical reputation and public profile were undoubtedly bolstered by O'Connor's attention to his art. With few collectors, video art proved a literal tough sell for the traditional art world. For Paik, the stakes for video art lay not in commerce, but rather in communication. If it could not survive in the marketplace, it would have to change its function and serve the greater good in the public sphere. "Thank you for your interest for *Bye Bye Kipling*," Paik wrote to O'Connor with his trademark conflation of wit and deference. "You are the saviour of Video Art itself."

front and back covers

Untitled (Nam June Paik licking stamp),
1979, gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in.
© 1979 Eric Kroll

Envelope with TV drawing and postage stamps, 1988, paper envelope with postage stamp collage and additions in crayon and ink, 12 x 15 1/2 in.

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Unless otherwise noted, all works illustrated are in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from Seymour Barofsky for the estate of John J. O'Connor.

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